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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/S; INR/AF  
STATE PASS TO MCC

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [LT](#)

SUBJECT: MAIN OPPOSITION PARTY LEADER VOICES CONCERN ABOUT LAND BILL

REF: A) MASERU 376 B) MASERU 380

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Summary  
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¶1. On Wednesday, October 28, Ambassador Rob Nolan met with the main opposition party leader, Tom Thabane, at the Embassy. The meeting's primary purpose was to clarify Thabane's opinion on the U.S. stance concerning the controversial Land Bill (ref A). According to Thabane, the ruling party has been telling opposition parties and the public that passage of the Land Bill is a prerequisite for continued Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) funding. Many citizens of the Kingdom seem to think that this bill is a means of exploiting the Basotho people, taking away their one true possession -land - and giving it to Americans or other foreign nationals (primarily the Chinese). The Ambassador clarified that the Land Bill is an initiative of the Lesotho Government, and non-passage of the Bill will not affect MCC funding. The Embassy will host a meeting with other opposition leaders on November 5 to share this same message.

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Thabane uncertain about U.S. intentions  
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¶2. Thabane began the visit with many references to Lesotho's ongoing political discussions concerning the 2007 elections, and his disappointment in the way democracy is currently being handled here. Then he turned to the Land Bill issue. He indicated that most people in the country think that MCC funding is directly tied to passage of the Land Bill, and that if the bill does not pass, compact funds will be taken away. He further noted that this opinion is being fostered by the Government of Lesotho (GOL), which is openly stating that the U.S. has set this condition.

¶3. The Ambassador let Thabane know that "Lesotho has to be ready" for land reform. He clarified that if the Land Bill does not pass, the remaining 16 MCC activities will not automatically be cancelled. If the current bill doesn't work, it may be possible to use the \$20 million reserved for land reform to develop a new Land Bill that is acceptable to everyone. The Ambassador encouraged the Land Bill discussion, noting that this is the first "healthy political debate" we have really witnessed in Lesotho, as all other debate seems to be focused on the 2007 election difficulties or on petty differences between parties.

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Ambassador offers to meet opposition  
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¶4. Thabane was grateful for the opportunity to talk about the Land Bill, and expressed relief that "our friendship with you

will not be damaged by closer look into" the Land Bill, and that even non-passage of the Land Bill does not jeopardize the other 16 activities. He stressed the importance of having a discussion with all the opposition leaders, because "nobody's correcting the impression that the U.S. is pushing the Land Bill." Thabane agreed that Land Reform is needed but stated that "we must postpone the debate so that we can come up with a suitable bill." He agreed to communicate to his colleagues in the opposition that we want to meet with them on this issue, and the Ambassador agreed to hold the meeting at his residence.

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Impression of the SADC Troika visit  
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15. Thabane also responded to questions about the recent visit by the Troika of the SADC Organ (ref B). He stated that opposition parties were not impressed, feeling that this new effort includes an attempt to "gloss off" the Masire report, which was relatively supportive of the opposition's position. The SADC visit was primarily a fact-finding mission, and this was not acceptable to the opposition, who felt that the Troika "just came", but didn't actually accomplish anything. Thabane personally "implores the international community to support the Masire report," and wants to see SADC follow through on Masire's recommendations.

16. On the other hand, Thabane is fully supportive of the new mediation process headed by the Christian Council of Lesotho (CCL), which began in August. He believes that the CCL is a good faith partner and is willing to pursue dialogue through this process. He also stressed that Lesotho must have Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) reform. He'd like to see Lesotho fix the IEC, develop new electoral laws, and then have a new election.

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Comment  
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17. Although the connection of the US to the debate over the Land Bill is unfortunate, it is refreshing to see a true political issue come to the fore and incite more than partisan political debate. The Land Bill has motivated all segments of Lesotho's society and forced them to consider some very basic issues about their heritage and how some cultural baggage may impede economic development. Post has been working with our GOL interlocutors on the Land Bill to ensure that fears about land reform do not lead to anti-American sentiments; in recent weeks, the rhetoric against the U.S. has largely disappeared.

18. Thabane reaffirmed the fact that all political actors in the country agree that election reform is necessary, but they are continually sidetracked by the contested results of the 2007 elections. Getting them to focus on revamping election law would be a true achievement. However, Thabane's new focus on electoral reform vs. allocation of seats is probably a simple indication that he is expecting or hoping for a snap election, given his advanced age and the likelihood that he will not be a viable candidate for Prime Minister much longer. In a related note, when discussing the SADC Troika visit, Thabane mentioned that he himself had never personally met any of these Ministers during his travels when he was part of the GOL. It was evident that Thabane felt insulted by the Troika's treatment of the opposition, particularly because SADC did not find someone more senior and better-known as their representatives.

NOLAN